A Survey on Chinese EFL Graduate Learners' Responses to English Academic Writing Course*

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Abstract—**A survey is conducted in this paper on Chinese EFL graduate learners' responses to their English academic writing course concerning content arrangement, teaching method, assessment system and overall evaluation. Results show that most learners are receptive and react positively to the course design, though there're areas that need to be improved. Pedagogical implications are discussed and suggestions for further research are provided.**

Keywords—graduate learner; learners' responses; English academic writing

I. INTRODUCTION

After the release of a Chinese national document in 2013 about graduate education reform (*Teaching and Research Document [2013] No. 1*), universities in China have been carrying out reforms concerning Academic English teaching, which is now apparently a hot area within English teaching. In Academic English teaching, graduate learners' academic writing ability is highly concerned, because it is not only about the individual destiny of "publish or perish", but also the academic achievement of the institutions they study in.

Since then teachers working with academic English writing course in China have been endeavoring for more effective ways to improve students' writing skills. Related literatures show that these teachers are mainly concerned about the following aspects: textual or genre analysis [1] [2], teaching method [3] [4] and assessment system [5]. These efforts do help in providing pedagogical implications, but the focus is mainly on teachers' perspective instead of learners, while more than a decade ago researchers have been arguing that ESP had become more learners centered [6]. Teachers need to know learners' responses after any kinds of reform in their way of teaching for further improvement.

The university the author works in also started an English teaching reform for non-English major graduate learners in September, 2017. This reform concerns about 3 aspects: curriculum, teaching method and assessment system. There are two academic English courses in this curriculum: International Academic Conference and English Academic

Writing (abbreviated as EAW in the following mention). The author has been teaching EAW for 3 semesters from September, 2017 to January 2019. For more efficient teaching, the author has been doing an action research in her classrooms since the beginning of this reform, aiming to figure out effective teaching plans, materials, methods and evaluation system. However, as the research goes on, the author is eager to know the students' attitudes and reactions to this course as a feedback. Thus, in January 2019, at the end of the 3rd cycle of her classroom research [7], the author conducted a survey and collected data of students' responses, with an expectation of improving her teaching by adjusting her plan to learners' responses.

II. ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING COURSE

For readers to understand learners' responses in this survey, the EAW course the author teaches is described here, including its aim, content arrangement, teaching method and assessment system.

The aim of the course is to help 1st year non-English major graduate students to improve their EAW ability, specifically for publishing articles in research journals. The author would like to prepare the students with 3 aspects of efficiency: language, logic and method, that is, acquiring rhetorical and linguistic features of research articles (abbreviated as RA in the following mention), developing clear and critical thinking and obtaining research methods such as in choosing a research topic, searching for literatures and coordinating the writing process.

The content arrangement of the course is shown in "Table I". The students attend the class 2 hours per week for 18 weeks. The content is divided into 3 phases. The 1st phase is from week 1 to week 4, during which period the teacher warms up the students with basic concepts, methods and thinking modes in writing RAs. Logic is paid much attention to, because, through 3 cycles of teaching, it's found that these students are fairly poor in logical training which affects their construction of RAs. The 2nd phase is from week 5 to week 14, in which the teacher focuses on rhetorical structures and linguistic features of particular parts of RAs. The teacher introduces the macro-structure of RAs first so as to give the students a general picture and then deals with each section separately. The 3rd phase is from week 15 to week 18, during which period the teacher finishes the rest

parts of RAs, such as acknowledgement, figures, reference, appendix, etc., and reviews what have been covered in the whole semester. Then during the last 3 weeks, each one writes in class a piece of academic paper with a given topic and reading materials, and then makes a presentation, summarizing and reflecting on what has been learned.

TABLE I.   CONTENT ARRANGEMENT IN EAW COURSE

Week	Period	Content
1	2	Course Introduction
2	2	Logic: syllogism in EAW
3	2	Logic: pyramid structure in EAW
4	2	The process of academic paper writing
5	2	Macro-structure of RAs
6/7	2	Introduction
8/9/10	2	Main section
11/12	2	Conclusion
13/14	2	Abstract
15	2	Unfinished business/review
16	2	Final: writing
17	2	Final: presentation 1
18	2	Final: presentation 2

The author adopts a genre analysis task-based teaching method. After 3 cycles of teaching practice, the final applicable framework of the task is revealed. 4 genre analysis tasks are carried out during one semester concerning the 4 sections of RAs: Introduction, Main Section, Conclusion and Abstract. Each task is composed of 7 stages. First, the students read the part of RAs they've chosen beforehand and discuss in groups the rhetorical and linguistic features before class. Second, the teacher introduces in class related move analysis theories and practices. Third, the students analyze specific moves of what they've read. Forth, students and the teacher hold a discussion in class. Fifth, students work in teams to write a corresponding section. Sixth, students give and get a peer review. Seventh, students get feedback from the teacher. During this process, there's a combination of reading and writing, and interaction and group work is highly appreciated.

The assessment of the course is composed of 2 parts. 60% is from achievement assessment and 40% is from language proficiency assessment. The achievement assessment includes 3 parts. The 1st 20% is on class attendance, class performance and assignment, the 2nd 20% is from final writing aiming to test their practical skills, and the 3rd 20% is from final presentation aiming to test their critical knowledge. Language proficiency assessment is a required test at the university level for all 1st year non-English major graduate students. In all, the students need to keep improving their English proficiency, learn practical skills and reflect critically on what they've learned in this course.

III.   THE SURVEY

As mentioned above, the purpose of the survey is for teachers to get a feedback of learners' responses to this course after 3 semesters of teaching. Participants are 246 1st year non-English major graduate students who choose to attend EAW from among 11 optional English courses. These students are from 10 classes and each class has about 25

students. 2 teachers are working together with the same course design, each one in charge of 5 classes. Among these 10 classes, 3 classes major in chemical science, 2 classes in geology and the other 5 classes in various disciplines. One teacher works with the students from chemistry and geology, the other with those from various disciplinary backgrounds.

The instrument of this survey is a combination of interview and questionnaire. The interview was done during the semester. Teachers randomly selected students from each class, asked questions and took notes in their teaching journals. The questionnaire was done at the last class of the semester. The questionnaire is designed with 26 items. 7 items are open-ended with short-answer questions, 19 items are closed with answers in Likert Scale. The content of the questionnaire is composed of 3 parts. Item 1-6 is on students' background information. Item 7-10 is on content arrangement. Item 11-19 is on learning tasks and methods. Item 20-24 is on course assessment. Item 25-26 is an overall evaluation of the course.

The questionnaire was uploaded to a Chinese online platform of questionnaires called Wen Juan Xing and linked to the students through two quick response codes (https://www.wjx.cn/jq/33024130.aspx; https://www.wjx.cn/jq/32502685.aspx).   Each   teacher distributed one code to her classes. In the last class of the semester, the students were given about 10 minutes to finish and submit online. Teachers then downloaded the original and automatically generated data. There are all together 242 pieces of valid responses since 4 students missed the last class. For data analysis of close-ended items, the author downloaded the frequency analysis data from SPSSAU, an automatic data analysis platform connected to Wen Juan Xing. For the open-ended items, two teachers categorized and extracted the most frequent responses.

IV.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through this survey, the author gets to know the students' attitudes and reactions in the 4 areas of content arrangement, teaching method, assessment system and overall evaluation of the course. In addition, the author would like to know the influence of disciplinary variation to their responses. So the discussion followed is arranged in 5 sections.

The results are shown in "Table II" and "Table III". Except for 6 questions about students' background information, there're totally 20 questions from both figures. In "Table II", answers of 11 questions are in Likert Scale. Column A, B, C, D and E represent 5 levels of agreement from the most strongly to the least. For each column, the number of responses (Res) and percentage of the total (Per) are listed. In "Table III", question 3 and 9 belong to close-ended multiple choice questions in the original design of questionnaire. While in order to rank students' chosen items, the author puts them in "Table III". The author lists in "Table III" the top categories of answers for each question with the number of responses followed in the brackets. Some numbers of responses are limited because many students avoid taking the effort to write their answers and just skip the

question, which is exactly the disadvantage of open-ended questions.

TABLE II. RESULTS FROM CLOSE-ENDED QUESTIONS

Items	A		B		C		D		E	
	Res	Per	Res	Per	Res	Per	Res	Per	Res	Per
1. Are you satisfied with the course in general?	148	61.2	88	36.4	6	2.48	0	0	0	0
2. Are you satisfied with the content arrangement?	150	62.0	84	34.7	7	2.9	0	0	1	0.8
3. Is the content arrangement difficult for you?	1	0.8	59	24.4	162	67.0	18	7.4	2	0.8
4. Do you like group work?	112	46.3	96	39.7	30	12.4	3	2.5	1	0.8
5. Is group work helpful in improving your English?	54	22.3	135	55.8	53	21.9	0	0	0	0
6. Can group work help improve your RS?	58	24.0	138	57.0	44	18.2	2	1.65	0	0
7. Do you like peer review?	70	28.9	120	49.6	46	19.0	6	2.5	0	0
8. Are you clear of RSs by doing genre analysis tasks?	92	38.0	143	59.1	7	2.9	0	0	0	0
9. Are you clear of language features?	35	14.5	168	69.4	37	15.3	2	1.7	0	0
10. Is final presentation difficult for you?	8	3.3	81	33.5	131	54.1	22	18.2	0	0
11. Is final writing difficult for you?	22	9.1	113	46.7	93	38.4	13	5.4	1	0.8

[a.] Res: responses; Per: percentage; RS: rhetorical structure

TABLE III. RESULTS FROM OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Items	Top Categories
1. What did you learn mostly in this course?	1). Rhetorical structure (89) 2). Language expression (15) 3). Logic (12)
2. What content do you want to add to this course?	1). Reading and analysis of RAs (10) 2). Writing and revising practice (9) 3). Combining writing with subject area closely (4)
3. Which section of RAs is most difficult to you?	10. Abstract (50) 2).Introduction (50) 3). Main section (41) 4). Results and discussion (32) 5). Conclusion. (20)
4. What is most difficult for you in group work?	1). Task allocation (43) 2). Opinion difference (35) 3). Subject variation (28)
5. What is your general evaluation of group work?	1). I like it very much. (24) 2). It's helpful if well planned. (18) 3). It's good. (14)
6. What is your general evaluation of peer review?	1). It's likely to find out more problems from others' perspectives. (50) 2). The errors pointed out by peers would be corrected immediately and remembered compared to those found out by teachers. (38)
7. What did you obtain in preparing final presentation?	1). It's a summary of what have been learned (47) 2). It helps to improve oral English and expressive ability. (21) 3). It helps to build up confidence (9) 4). It helps to improve logical thinking (8)
8. What is most difficult for you in final writing?	1). Words and sentence construction (43) 2). Hard time in examining the topic (27) 3). Moves and logic (26)
9. Which testing method do you prefer?	1). Presentation (147) 2). 200-300 word article section (85) 3). 2000-3000 word disciplinary RAs (48) 4). Closed academic English test (34) 5). Closed question test (8)

A. Students' Overall Evaluation of the Course

97.6% of the students out of 242 responses are satisfied with the overall arrangement of the course. When asked about what they learned the most, they mentioned frequently the general structure and process of writing academic papers. Some students expressed in the interview that they had no idea of how to write and where to start, and this course offered a general picture of academic paper writing, especially patterns in their disciplinary areas. Students also mentioned much about English improvement and the training of logical thinking.

There has been much dispute on whether EAW should be taught by English teachers or subject tutors, since language teachers are lack of subject knowledge while subject tutors are not good at English [8]. While as shown in this result, students could as well acquire rhetorical structures, language expression and logical patterns in an EAW course taught by language teachers, which fulfills the exact purpose of this course. Subject knowledge serves as a carrier of language and helps students to better understand the concepts of writing, but does not necessarily work to achieve it. So, the right attitude towards EAW is that language teachers are

capable of teaching this course which serves as a basis for understanding EAW instead of enhancing subject knowledge, while it does lay a foundation for more advanced and subject-oriented academic studies.

B. Students' Responses to Content Arrangement

As shown in "Table II", 96.7% of the students are satisfied with the content arrangement, in which rhetorical structures and language features for each section of RAs are focused. In addition, the first 4 periods of warming-up and the last 4 periods of practice are welcomed by the students.

As for the level of difficulties in the teaching content and materials, 67.0% of the students consider it is of medium level, but still 25.2% of them think it's difficult. This result is similar to He [9] in that for more than half of the students, the content arrangement is of medium level and only a small percentage of students think it's difficult. So we confirm that genre analysis tasks are not very difficult for most 1st year non-English major graduate students. For rhetorical structures, the most difficult sections are abstract and introduction, followed by main section and results and discussion, and the least difficult part is conclusion, which is different from He [9] who finds that main section remains the most difficult one while abstract is the easiest. The difference is possibly due to variation in students' subject areas and the number of participants in the survey. Obviously, the present survey involves more than double the number of participants and a more variety of disciplines than that of He [9].

When asked about what else they would like to be included in this course, 92 students choose no more. For the rest of them, the top one is that teachers had better offer a hands-on reading analysis of literatures and RAs. Next, they want more practical time spent with teachers to write and revise their own papers. Third, some students hope it's better to combine EAW with their subject studies. This result implies that a combination of reading and writing in EAW class is necessary, and apparently, the students are eager to get a hands-on guidance from language teachers. Finally, the cooperation framework between language teachers and subject tutors is still expected to show in further research so as to satisfy the students' needs for a combination of academic writing with subject knowledge. Writing workshop would be a good choice to for both language teachers and subject tutors to work together and offer more practical help. In the university where the author works, a project of EAW workshop is now being carried out, in which English teachers and subject tutors are expected to provide more guidance for students.

C. Students' Responses to Teaching Methods

In this section, students are asked to give their attitudes or reactions towards group work, peer review and genre analysis tasks, which are 3 main teaching methods practiced in that semester. Firstly, 86.0% of the students enjoy group work. 78.1% of them think it helps to improve their English. Some students interviewed said they would consult each other much more frequently and choose among all contributions more accurate language expressions. 81.0% of the students think group work helps to clarify their misunderstandings of rhetorical structures. And the students interviewed said ambiguity is likely to arise because the pattern of RA writing is fairly new to them as 1st year graduate students, and disciplinary variation causes even more confusion, so exchange of ideas from a peer perspective helps them to clarify the ambiguities. However, the top 3 difficulties in group work lie in task allocation, difference of opinions and subject variation, among which the hardest thing is to allocate tasks before writing. And in actual writing, students have a hard time negotiating their opinions on things like moves, word choice and syntactic structures. Plus, different disciplinary backgrounds would make it harder. For their overall evaluation of group work, most of them like it very much. Some students said it would be helpful and motivating if it's well planned. So teachers' guidance is essential for effective group work. If teachers could issue specific rules of task allocation in advance and arrange those with similar disciplinary backgrounds to work together on the same project, it would be easier and more beneficial to the students.

Secondly, 78.5% of the students like peer review. For their general evaluation of peer review, the top one answer is that they could figure out more problems in their writings with peer review. And the second one is that the errors pointed out by peers would be taken and corrected immediately compared to those found out by teachers. We can see that peer review in academic writing is applicable and helps promote learners' motivation in finding out more problems as well as in error correction, which would help release teachers' worries that students keep unconscious of their inter-language errors and repeat the same error again and again. Nevertheless, students also mentioned the disadvantages of peer review. They would not trust some of the peer review without teachers' confirmation. And due to subject variation, students sometimes couldn't offer very accurate advice on rhetorical structures. So in teachers' feedback, a confirmation of peer review is needed. And if possible, teachers had better put students from similar subject areas into same groups for more accurate and effective review.

Thirdly, for genre analysis tasks, the author focuses on students' learning of rhetorical structures and language features. The results show that 97.1% of the students are clear of rhetorical structures after taking these tasks and there's none who isn't. 84.0% of students have acquired language features for each section of RAs. So, it's seen that students' reaction to genre analysis tasks is positive, similar to the result of He [9].

D. Students' Responses to Assessment System

During the author's 3 cycles of action research, several assessment methods have been tried, such as a 2000-3000 word disciplinary research article as a product of learning, a closed question test, a closed academic English test with blank-fillings, multiple choices and translation, a 200-300 word essay with a given topic and reading materials, and a presentation summarizing and reflecting on what they've learned.

As shown in "Table II", students' favorite testing method is presentation, in which the score distribution of the students' summary, reflection, language and manner are respectively 5, 10, 3 and 2 points, and reflection is highly valued. Most students feel that presentation is a good way for them to review what they've learned and practice their oral English and expressive capability because the 1st year graduate students have a rare chance to do it, but in the near future they are likely to present their research papers on occasions like international conferences. In addition, some students say it makes them more confident in their speech manners and skills in making effective power point. When asked if presentation is difficult, 36.8% of the students think it is, while 54.1% think it's of medium level and 18.2% think it's easy. It's seen that this task demands a comprehensive ability and consequently much effort, because on one hand, students need to reorganize what they've learned and poke into particular areas to come up with creative reflections, on the other, they need to acquire public speech skills to convey themselves to the audience in a clear way. For example, power point needs to be brief, English needs to be expressive and thinking needs to be logical. However, this task is achievable through their effort, as more than 70% of them think it's not that difficult.

Following presentation, the 200-300 word essay is also acknowledged by the students, but the total responses is 85, no more than half of the participants. When asked if it's difficult, more than half of them (55.8%) think it is. For most students, the most difficult part is on language, especially on vocabulary and grammar deficiency. It reveals that students are still not familiar with academic expression of English and vocabulary in specialized areas. Sentence structures remain as a headache for some students in both reading and writing, as long sentence structures are frequently shown in academic contexts. The second thing they feel difficult is examining the topic with reading materials. Students from different classes are given different topics or article sections to write, such as literature review, abstract, introduction, etc. The reason why they had a hard time composing these materials is that they couldn't skillfully apply particular moves into writing practice though they know what moves there're in each section of RAs, so they couldn't precisely orient and write within a short period of time. "Table III" also shows that moves and logic is the 3rd most difficult thing in their writing, which matches this inference.

For the other 3 testing methods, only 48 students prefer to write a 2000-3000 word disciplinary research article, 34 students would like a closed academic English test and 8 students want a closed question test, which are all lower than 20%. The reason might be that these participants have taken presentation and a 200-300 word essay as their final tests and they're familiar with them but unfamiliar with the other three. However they still show motivation in writing a 2000-3000 word disciplinary article, which is anyway their primary purpose of attending this course.

E. The Influence of Disciplinary Variation to Students' Responses

As mentioned before, these 242 participants are taught by two English teachers, each one responsible for 121 students. The questionnaire is distributed respectively to these two groups of students (we call them Group A and Group B). Group A are students from 3 classes all majoring in Chemistry and 2 classes all in Geology. That is, students in each class come from the same discipline. EAW is their required English course, and they have a strong motivation to learn as they are required to publish English academic papers. Group B are students from a variety of disciplines in which each class contains students from science, art or engineering, and EAW is their optional course. Most of them choose it not because they're required to publish but they have higher expectations for themselves. So both groups have equally strong motivation in learning. For their English proficiency, as elicited from questionnaires, the distributions of their English scores at Graduate Entrance Exam are fairly similar. As shown in "Table IV", the difference between two groups at the same score level is within 5.0% except for the level at 50-59.

TABLE IV.   SCORE DISTRIBUTION FROM ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TEST

Score level	Group A (percentage of responses)	Group B (percentage of responses)	Difference (A-B)
Above 90	2.48	1.65	0.83
80-89	4.96	3.31	1.65
70-79	11.57	15.70	-4.13
60-69	29.75	33.88	-4.13
50-59	44.63	36.36	8.27
Below 50	6.60	9.09	-2.48

Furthermore, it's found that responses from two groups are similar as well, except that the percentage of those who think presentation and writing are difficult in Group B is about 20% higher than that of Group A. The reason is probably that Group A has done a presentation and similar writing practice during the semester and the teacher has made comments on both, while Group B didn't. So the difference might be caused by teacher instruction and students' practice. Thus we can say that, assuming students' motivation, language proficiency, teacher instruction and students' training and practice are not of much difference, students' responses to this course is similar, which means disciplinary variation doesn't influence students' responses in a great way. A strong concern for EAW teachers is whether students from different subject areas could stay in the same class for EAW. As indicated in this survey that Group A has similar responses with Group B, we can say that classes with students from different subject areas could work together in EAW course in a way that they are equally receptive to the same course design as those who come from the same discipline.

V.   CONCLUSION

Based on the author's 3 cycles of classroom research, a survey is conducted in this paper on the 1st year non-English

major graduate students' responses to EAW course concerning content arrangement, teaching method, assessment system and overall evaluation. Results show that students are satisfied with and receptive to the present course design, which indicates that language teachers are capable of preparing these students in mastery of basic concepts, thinking mode, language expression, writing skills and research methods in EAW course for a more advanced and subject-oriented academic studies. In addition, students' disciplinary variation doesn't influence much their responses to EAW course when they have similar learning motivation, language proficiency, teacher instruction and practical training. In most universities of China, it's infeasible to put students with exactly the same disciplinary backgrounds into the same English classes due to lack of language teachers and large number of students. So when students with similar disciplinary backgrounds couldn't work together, the variation of subject areas wouldn't cause such a big obstacle as teachers have imagined in EAW course, though we do expect the former situation.

Meanwhile, we find some areas need to be improved in this course, especially in teaching methods. First, a hands-on guidance from language teachers is expected by the students. Also, they want more closed combination of EAW with their subject knowledge. The EAW workshop is recommended to meet the students' needs here. Second, for more benefit from group work and peer review, teachers need to guide with specific rules and provide immediate confirmation.

For further research, more hands-on pedagogical practices need to be explored to improve the students' writing efficiency. And teachers are suggested to combine textual analysis of students' writings and questionnaires or interviews together for a more comprehensive evaluation of their responses.

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